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i. Dreaming

Dreaming of an Old Friend

for Connor

The stars are sentient and musical,
postcard-bright in the navy sky; the sand
moon-white though we see no moon.

It feels good to cry silently,
your mind brushing the edges of mine,
each tear on my face a thought --

*missed you since i left
so much wrong i've done
you still answer my calls
this beach this moment
gone tomorrow*

I reach for the worn-soft
of your flannel, tipping over
to lay my head down wordlessly
on your booted feet:

*forgive
this weakness;
too long
since i touched love.*

Your head on my side is absolution
as you curl behind me, bodies not holding
just brushing as we listen to the stars
and watch the waves rolling in,
a sheet billowed by the invisible moon.

Fumbling Toward Nirvana: A study in hypotheticals

If I ever get cancer
you'll just say you told me so;
buy me candy cigarettes
and carry me to the window
to blow bubbles at the stars.
It is better to laugh with Death
than beg God, we have heard.

If you're ever hospitalized
with slit wrists or overdose-blood,
I'll slap you once, hard,
for not calling me first
to see if I could stop you,
then hold your hand to my face
and kiss the torn or untorn veins
of your wrist in gratitude.

And if neither of us make it out alive,
I'll strike a match in the underwhelming darkness
you think will be the other side
and drag you toward rebirth with me.

Adult Entertainment Tableau

i. *American Hot Bods, Wilmington*

There is a feeling of chromosomal solidarity:
no men before 11,
all women, 18-75, crushed together,
eyes meeting as we try on
the male gaze,
enjoy the lens.

I expected to ethnograph,
catcall, tuck some dollar bills,
but twice I interfere,
touch the objects of my studies,
drag a hand over the sweat-sticky,
hairless torsos onstage,
a man in a pink velvet thong
whose name I'm not expected to cry
growls "You are sexy, truly,"
another whose leathered member
threatens to unshoulder my dress
because that's what I paid for.

ii. *Teasers Men's Club, Durham*

The neon pink sign out back is broken –
intentionally? –
to say Tease Me Club.
We are the odd couple –
him in a suit vest and white shirt,
leather on his feet,
beard immaculate,
me in a black dinner dress,
boots red-laced, up to my knees
in buckles;
I'm sure they wondered.

Dark hair, dark eyes,
sinuous to metal with her
one black garter
tight around those curves,

and we achieve simultaneous
“Gawd dayum.”

He can’t touch, just
fund, so I tuck his money in,
tell her that the gentleman
would like a word.

Rob Zombie growls
somewhere beyond us
while she puts my hands
where she wants
and I kiss the patchouli’d skin
of her breastbone,
nipples between the fingers
of my suppliant hands,
feeling his grey-blue gaze
tracking us, enjoying
what he’s paid for,
her nails raking down my neck.

Our Dreams All Sound Like Fanfictions

i. *Marriage of Convenience*

I had a dream about you last night, he says.
We got married for tax purposes
and you carried me into the chapel,
then we had a weird block party thing
in the parking lot of a recently abandoned supermarket.

Sounds like us. We should do it.
Which part?
All of it.
There's really no downside, I guess.
And if you wanted to sleep with other women,
I'd just sleep with them too.
That sounds fair.

ii. *Bodyswap*

I had a dream about you last night, I say.
We were in the house on the beach where I was a child,
and we woke in each other's bodies.
What'd we do?
You went about your day as usual –
playing guitar and reading DnD manuals,
but in my body.
And I
I just

dressed you in that flannel I stole from you.

Red Skies and Selkie Boys

i.

I heard him first through the fog off the ocean,
edged by salmon sunrise and singing the rhyme
my sailor father taught me about red skies in the morning.
I didn't think he saw me, watching
as he swung his driftwood sword two-handed
through fog-wraiths and stamping night mares,
but when they lay defeated, dissipating into the tossed sand,
he sheathed his sword in the loops of his faded blue jeans
and footprinted to me, half-hiding in the beach grass susurrus.
He was shirtless, and the fragile bellows of his ribcage
brought to mind the anoles my brothers caught,
their terrible tenderness trapped in careful palms,
but his smile was wide and crooked,
white teeth all crowding for the front row behind his lips,
and his hazel eyes were gold and alive,
so I didn't think he might be breakable.
He stuck out one browned and salty hand
and didn't mind the damp sand I got on his fingers.

ii.

School was hard for him, easy for me.
Some days I would see him in the corner of my eye
biting ragged fingertips and slipping callused feet from shoes,
flexing his toes to stretch the webbing between them.
I knew when a teacher yelled at him
for not paying attention, or an older boy
yanked his long oak-and-sunshine hair
and called him a fag so quietly no one could reprimand.
These days he would take me to our salt marsh
on the handlebars of his creaking bike, and
I would hide our shoes in the bushes.
As we squelched untalking through the low-tide mud,
scuttling crabs and avoiding the sharpened mouths of oysters,
I would watch the twitch, shift, and slide of his back muscles,
trusting his feet to pick our way through the cord grass
to our island, little jut of live oak forest

where some spiritual one had built a wooden clapboard chapel
then abandoned it to nature and whatever gods they believed in.
It was the only place he sang anymore, voice strong and rhythmic
like the waves falling against the shore in the dark midnight,
or high and broken like the keening wail of a seagull.

iii.

When he fell in love with a girl who wanted his eyes
to look at herself, his voice to sing for her alone,
I splinted his disjointed parts with driftwood and red wine
in our chapel and he stole my kisses,
forgetting until morning I was not the one he wanted.
I would count the notches in his spine
until he fell asleep, and think of the night he told me
about a baleen whale who sang on a frequency
no other whales could hear, her singular voice
bouncing around the ocean meaninglessly,
growing deeper each unresponsive year.
We were watching stars, waiting for them to fall,
and I reminded him that scientists heard her calls,
but he said they didn't count, they weren't whales
and could never love her back. I guess he was right.
I followed her across the oceans,
and when she died from "lack of socialization,"
I never told him why I was crying.

iv.

The sky was in flames the morning he disappeared.
We'd spent one last summer night on our island
before fall froze the mud, frightened away the birds
and sent me two hours from my ocean and him.
In the inferno of sunrise, he went sailing,
his departure a foggy memory of waves crashing,
sleepy mumbling that he shouldn't test the weather,
and his laughter, promises to be back before I woke.
He wasn't when I woke up late to pounding rain
and, searching through metallic sheets,

I found only absence of color on the small beach
where I should have seen his green-and-gold sails,
no matter how far I ran, kicking wet sand, yelling his name.
Later, his boat was found, crunching gently against the rocks, sails ripped,
but never his body and after two months of morbid beachcombing,
they stopped seeing him in every lump of driftwood.
I still murmur his name to the cranes and the crabs,
remembering stories from my mother about men who were not men:
He came to me from the mist and the sea, hair dark and slick,
running against the wind on broad flat feet.
I held him for seven years of marsh-mudfights
and guarding turtle nests, seven years cradling the ferocity
of the ocean in my two small arms,
but there was always a song I could not hear,
one beneath his human skin, and looking back,
I would never loop the knot and tie him to my dry sand
once he heard the ocean's call in his salty blood.

Summer Hits

Baby, you a song, smell
of beach store tanning oil,
clean sweat swerving
in salted rivulets down our sides,
meeting the bright towels beneath
our darkening, *light me up*
that cigarette
at the Oak Island DQ where
our cutoffs are dresscode,
our bikinis
not quite the right size
because they're never quite
the right size while
your sand-filled Vans,
my two-year Reefs *bring that beat*
back to me again,
singing sister
with the windows down like
it's that first summer I had a car
and the AC doesn't work but
we're heading into the shimmery swelter
of highway between us and
our beach, our sand,
our secret-sharing.

God Had a Dream Last Night

and when He rolled over, restless,
it slipped from His head and down to the Port City –
a boy and girl smoking hookah
in the Gypsy's orange room,
yesterday's weed still soaking in the couches.
They wander through the river's wind watching drunks,
hunting the mosaic that proclaims Nin's BIJOU,
foyer to the homeless stoop mid-parking-lot
where they settle, shivering teeth sparking lips
until it is too cold to feel senseless fingers
electrically tangled in hair.
She muffles his trembling in the star-lit black
of a back-road November night,
her fingers catching on the bones of him;
permission asked, granted to button-fumble,
shadow-trace and, eyes closed, kneel,
the only shape she'll pray to
sitting on the worn-velvet backseat,
thighs shaking. Nothing comes of it,
but they never ask the time when they're together
and when they say goodbye,
God wakes happy, remembering the tired head on breast,
the foggy homeward bound,
and leaves a sliver of moon in the sky
to remember them by, His children, wherever they are.

| Red Bull

i.

once, I did not understand
the riot
of a not-quite,
maybe-never-will
touch –
sleep, hovering
just there,
pleasure in denial.

ii.

Wendy's parking lot
watching someone
watching Princess Bride
in their second floor apartment
and you know man,
it's one of those infinite moments
where you have to just
dunk your fry
in the Frosty
and say I do not think it means
what you think it means.
(we might be the men in shirtsleeves
but not lonely not now
leaning in.)

iii.

we go out because
the time left
is as short as
the distance will be long
and there's nothing like a bar
on a Monday night
to make you feel
apocalyptically alive,
struggle-joined with the other
heavy-jacketed, smoke-curtained
defiers of the law

of the weekend.

iv.

the liminal

fallen lids

double-bass

60 oz. taurine

might just

heart-

stop

v.

no one ever gets to the end

and wishes they'd slept more.

ii. Waking

My Dear Sons and Daughters

Fall in love with everything
but people.

Fall in love with ideas: anarchy
and LaVeyan Satanism.

Fall in love with solitary back-packing
through Israel or Tijuana.

Fall in love with gamma radiation
or tiger-taming, MMA cage fighting
or free-climbing the Rocky Mountains,
but do not fall in love
with people.

People will want you
for your similarities to one
or more of their parents;
they will want you
for the outline, the concept of you;
they will want you
because you want them –
they will not know
what they want.

People will take the bed you shared
and fuck other people
in the barely cooled indent
of your absent body
(they will also take your cat,
leaving you with scarred hands
and nothing for them to hold).

They will promise to never leave you
and maybe they won't,
but they will buckle you in with them
on the bipolar-coaster,
left flying off unfinished tracks,
and you will have to jump,
parachuteless.

They will be perfect
except for little things –
answering their phone during dinner,
taking their mother's word as scripture,
sleeping with their socks on –
and you will be tempted,
so very tempted,
to love people,
but trust me when I tell you
you'd be better off
in love with tightrope walking
between skyscrapers.

Sadness Dog in the Abattoir

I've thumbed through collections, searching
for a psalm more reassuring than David's,
but I've found nothing to satiate
her sadness dog.

It's circling.

It wants to lay on the bed,
but will not sleep.

It scratches at the doors
but doesn't want to play.

It follows her to the kitchen
but there is nothing there
it wants to eat.

It will not let her leave
the TV, grey heavy body
pinning her to the lies.

It has shredded the blanket-safety
with its dulled teeth,
and hidden the bits beneath the couch.

I cannot find them
like I cannot find
the words.

Angel, Angel Down We Go Together

We're driving down quiet roads toward our city,
the port city of cobblestones and brick warehouses,
hoop-eared punks and camoed rednecks prowling
in tacit armistice along the riverbanks.

She curses the Ford that blinds us
with its blue-white high beams,
and starts the playlist 'back in MY day,'
skipping Papa Roach -- an apologetic smile
as we both grimace remembering
the times we felt they were relatable --
landing on the Chili Peppers.

The ashtray's full and I'm spillin' my guts
She jokes that she's not sure
how any of us survived so much, uh,
so much angst without trips to white-walled rooms.
I eye the tidy row on her wrist, ivoried scars,
the 70-degree-angle intersection
that follows her heart's blue highway,
and recall the jagged words
she Stanley-knifed into her thigh -- *see no evil*,
a punishment for looking, for saying nothing
when a man pulled his shorts to his knees
and asked her opinion while he stroked himself.

She notices my gaze but stays silent,
hands fidgeting on the steering wheel,
searching the console for absent cigarettes.
There's just too much that time cannot erase
She squeezes her eyes shut, then glances up at the stars
that fade with each approaching streetlight.
An anniversary for her, perhaps; one of many
uncelebrated days that summon the memories,
open them like pop-ups behind her eyes.

As we pass a field of moonlit cornstalks
she says, "These lines of poorly-laid collagen
aren't failed attempts
inspired by sad music about abortions and ODs."

"What are they then?"

"A coping mechanism.

An addiction.

The fingerprints of men I wanted
to want me but didn't always want
to touch me." She strokes her left wrist
with her right thumb, gently, as if the skin is still torn.

"He was the first of them all,
my down-the-road, not across-the-street,
and if there is an explanation,
he wrote it on a blanket
in the blood of my thirteen-year-old self,
evidence that he could not wash away
or erase from his hard drive, probably still hidden
in the small closet of his quiet house."

I know better than to comfort her by hand,
know I am allowed only simple questions or silence
in these rare revelatory moments.

"What would it explain?"

She hits next on the iPod beneath her emergency brake --

we never armed our souls

for what the future would hold

She laughs quietly, and it sounds
like eight years of bitterness against the children of God
who hung their millstone of judgment
around the neck of a stumbling little one.

She looks at me then, eyes bright and colorless
in the alien light of the radio, and says

"Why I let them fuck me."

Play Dead

I said no once. Twice.

Made noise.

To bears, that only means
come back later,

cold-cracked paws,

hunger-breath in my ear.

Play dead;

~~the bear will go away.~~

The bear will roll me over.

Drape my limp arms
around his neck.

Begin eating, face first.

Abuse

The difference between a bottle of wine
and this bottle of wine
is why you drank the bottle of wine.

This bottle of wine you drink alone
when you realize how close you are to broke;
this the bottle where you lose anxiety,
only to find it later, bitter and indigestible,
forcing its way back from the center of your gut
while you lie on the bathroom rug in your underwear,
apologizing to your cats and wondering if you will die,
and if it would be terrible, and when someone
finally came to find you, how bad you would smell.

This is that bottle of wine,
the whole thing, tipped vertical and shaken
to be sure.

There is no poetry in him

just fucking in hotel beds
and the straightforward mystery
of a closed safe,
and you don't have to be a thief
to know you won't be the one
to open him,
but it won't keep you
from tapping at the edges
and twirling at the lock,
cheek flush with cold metal,
silent-listening for a hint of click.

Wish You'd Tried Harder

You should know
that when he said he loved me,
I only said "I know,"
and when he said he wanted
what was beneath my breasts
I only laughed "My ribs?"
because Mama always told me
not to hold what you don't own
so I loved them all with fingertips and open palms,
but you,
you were all-nighters on that intracoastal pier,
watching the sun rise between your brown curls;
you were the six-hour weekend road trips
just to bring me home to our inflatable bed;
you were french toast when we woke up at noon,
smothered in so much sugar and syrup and butter
that I almost made myself sick eating it;
you were the one who only pulled me closer
when I elbowed you for snoring.
I loved you by the handful,
pulled you into me
and had you sign your name just there,
but still you left me long before
I took my books and said goodbye to our cat.
Maybe it was just too much
to make love, hungry, as you once were,
for my closed-eyes gasping of your name,
to hunt for stars with me in conversational darkness.
Nightly, you slipped through the cracks
in my tight-cupped fingers
and pooled yourself into a computer-screen silhouette,
a shadowman whose love I might have dreamt
did the fingerprint-echoes not ache like bruises
and my heart not cramp
imagining another beside you on our bed.

"I guess they're just going to have to get over it."

for Daisy

They wanted you to apologize
to the boy who was filmed
raping your unconscious fourteen-year-old body;
said the case had to be dismissed.
And it was.

It was. Despite the confession, the rape kit,
the video passed around your high school,
the grandson of the state representative
is attending college, tweeting unrepentant
about how all women want the D.

Two years later, after you have tried twice to die,
I see your story; Anonymous swearing justice,
people saying you wanted it,
that small-town girls are just sluts,
even the fourteen-year-olds, younger than the sister
I left in my own tiny county.

I am forced to remember: the scalding looks
shot across the aisles of my Baptist church
(the first place he ever spoke to me,
twenty-seven years of experience
leveled against a misplaced thirteen-year-old);
the woman who lectured me on taking responsibility
for my own actions, that it was a mistake,
one he would suffer for more than I would.
The pastor telling my parents
that *his* family needed the support more,
as if that explained why he sat
on their side of the courtroom while I sat
on mine, staring at the brown of *his* head,
listening to gray-haired deacons testify
that he was a good man, understanding the implication:
I was not a good girl, making a big deal out of nothing,
how could it be rape I never said no
to anything he asked of me except my little sister --
then I said I would kill him

if he touched her.

It's been eight years.
I still can't say "I was raped"
without adding "It was only statutory,"
but for us, the girls and women and boys and men
who daily swallow the words
with antidepressants,
I write in first-person,
add my shaking hands and voice to yours
because none of us should have to live
wondering what we did
to be blamed for this.

Power

I told you if I went to jail I'd kill you.

He said it; dream-he repeats
in this breed of him-nightmares
where I am running not laying,
screaming not silent.

It sounds coffin-hollow,
not his lips forming this
explanation for the butterfly
reflected in eyes mirror-flat.

Dream-terror screaming,
I barricade the door to the room
where once there was a bed
where once he said he loved me
where it's still written on the wall
and call the police.

It is in the slow rise from sleep
that I realize his smallness,
contracted to an adolescence
that could not stop me stopping him.

iii. Living

The sub's Prayer

Our Lord, which art in heaven
on earth, Master be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done

on our knees as it is

in shibari.

Give us this day our holy dread,

and forgive us our trespasses

once we have been thoroughly punished for them.

Leave us not without your handcuffs,

but deliver us to submission:

For Thine is the kingdom,

and the power,

and the safeword:

Amen.

Toska

"... [toska] is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning."

-- Vladimir Nabokov

A lip-print mars the crystal glass of rosé.
I once swore to never drink alone.
The comings and goings of light and sound
gleam across the blank-screen tv, dimly
and there is only the sound of crickets and laughter, distant,
planes flying overhead, full of people
close enough for caressing, for breathing
each other's breath in the stale-pretzel humanity
of coach. I imagine their night-view,
light pollution like earth-bound stars below;
for me, streetlights, cheap motels and shitty cars.

Night is a thin chill on the sheets,
and the books in their cases lean,
cover to hand-worn cover,
rounded spines just touching.
I'm not sure whose hand they want
fingering their bindings,
but mine no longer seems sufficient.
The cats are hiding beneath the bed
whose surface I use only half of,
arm sometimes slipping off the edge
though there is no one to grumble
if I take more than my share of mattress.
I'm sure that if Whoever was here
the cats would not be hiding.

The Socks of Strangers

I've started a collection of stranger's socks.
Unintentional – they spin into the dryer-ravine,
then get lost in my sweatshirt sleeves
or cling to my t-shirts,
winding up in the sock drawer
with the other singles.

Sometimes I get a pair near to matching
and fold the odd couple in chimeric matrimony,
but most often they are made
for the one week girlfriend
whose shoes remain outside in the hall,
or the man below me
who likes blue lint between his toes
or the guy with the briefcase
who's midnight tired from his silvering dreads
to his silk-threadbare shin socks.

I always imagine these owners,
these faces seen in passing,
holding this one pairless
(useless) sock they won't throw out
just in case its partner returns.

I thought of leaving my collection
in the laundry room.
I didn't,
but I haven't throw them out yet either.

The Understanding

When I'm drunk or
you're drunk or
we're drunk
and uncommitted at the same bar,
we leave together,

sit and fiddle with beers
at your place
my place
your dad's place?
someone's place,
laugh at the dramatic-moment music
in movies made when I was three,
talk about my ex-
cat, how you got high and played
in the snow,

and you find the shower
eventually after a beer-chug
beer-spill
beer-ponder,
myself trailing, tiptoeing
into the jeans-and-boxers puddle,
placing my folded clothes on the sink,
slipping in behind
the temperature adjustment
from the fjord-freezing or lobster-boiling
you turned on yourself

and while you wash my back,
pressing the curves with longing
lazy, I rub the soap into your red-
blue diamonds
as if I want the ink to stain
my fingers and

you slip inside me like water
and I watch your legs

bowing behind mine
and think of birds
(I will always be too
short for this love
and you will always give up, laughing,
untoweled thin body dripping
on the comforter),

and you won't say my name
and I won't ask if you want to get dinner
but at least your hunger looks me in the eye.

Travis, Tow Truck Romeo

"Maybe we could get coffee or something."
At sixteen or eighteen, I would have found
our two-hour tire-hunt through the rain charming,
romantic even; creative young mind
turning an opportunistic tow-truck driver
into a Pall Mall-smoking white knight,
here to rescue me from a flat tire
and my not-quite-boyfriend, two-cat life.

I stare out the window,
chewing my thoughts while he tells stories:
"This last girl, she just used me for sex.
Next time 'round, I wanna have someone
that's my best friend, you know?"
*So they can burn you at both ends
instead of just one, yes, I know.*
"I got laid on a bet one time.
Yeah, sad thing is, she was a terrible lay."
*I know a thing or two about terrible lays:
'dead fish' beats 'dick who doesn't know what foreplay is'.*

He says I don't talk very much; I smile, protest,
continue texting my mum where I am,
worried he will demand more than conversation
for driving me all over three counties
and that I will have to hit him (around 6'5, 350)
hard enough to keep his hands off me (5'3, 135).
In the end, he only texts me after unloading my car
(not worth the \$2000 required to pass inspection):
"If you ever wanna ride the bike,
just keep this number ;) ..."
I do not.
I'm not sixteen or eighteen anymore.
I'm content with two cats and my three-hours-away
sometimes-lover, waiting for me to tell him I'm still alive.
I don't believe that love arrives serendipitous,
disguised as a stormy day and a dry-rotted wheel.

Hotel Ghosts

"I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds....my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost."

--Jack Kerouac, *On The Road*

i.

Old Northern Man's voice broke
saying she was gone, fifty years together yesterday,
and now she's gone, no face across his in the booth.
His shaking fingers, warped like old pier planks,
tried to scrub the tears before they fell
because he was old-fashioned as a gin martini
and men like him don't cry in front of bartenders,
mist-eyed and uncertain whether to hug him
or give him the bill in silence.
He took his bill in silence and shuffled
through the Sheraton's echoing
to the king size bed, half-empty.

ii.

Fayetteville Tech was alone at the bar,
hotel Sunday-empty of guests.
He was there waiting for his partner's death,
but after saying the hospital was the best
they'd been to, talked of anything else.
He played a video of a rogue shark
jumping from the shallow Ocean Isle intracostal,
said Canadian brewers make most Kentucky whiskey,
and swore that Fayetteville
was being cleared of its strip clubs.
He really wanted to believe it,
but that's just too many men, lonely and bored,
stuck together in one base.

iii.

When Butt-Chin walked in,
his hand-held with his "daughter"
rang female warning bells,

but he was all smiles – she’s epileptic,
a special girl, we come here all the time,
oh really, an English major, me too,
read *The Godfather*, it’s mind-blowing,
sorry to keep you so long, good luck –
probably still smiling when he walked out
leaving only his signature
on an unpaid bill.

iv.

Knob Creek was center in the pack of three
that made the front desk girls swoon,
and despite their short hair, confident loudness
and love of top-shelf bourbon,
you’d have to hear them complain about Fayetteville
and make fun of the “yuppie locals”
to know for sure
what was behind the civilian camo.
Later, he would specify not just military but
Special Forces Medic,
intimacy issues included.

v.

Southern Boy
is a man, reminder of home, simple sweet
like milk chocolate Hersheys,
gentle-eyed, soft-spoken and constant:
bacon burger, medium, nothing else on it,
french fries, and a Budweiser.
Not a big tipper,
but sometimes you let that slide,
happy he’s happy, his father
a successful liver transplant,
his eyes never dipping down too far.

Ode to Finn

The best sleeping spots are places
where you shouldn't be –
any open drawer in my dresser,
the leather jacket that doesn't smell funny
yet, my hypoallergenic pillows.
If I sleep too late, you jump on the bed
and glare at me with golden eyes;
if I'm in the kitchen, you sit on the sink;
the bathroom, you perch on the toilet,
crying, until I brush your small buff head
or trickle water for you to bat at.
You know which rattle and squeal means I'm home,
peeking through the white blinds
and meeting my shoes at the door,
and whatever else is said about you,
when I think your brother hates me,
or when my feet are cold, my black pants hairless,
my poetry awful or my tips paltry,
you're there to head-butt me
back to your reality,
knead me when I need you,
and finally settle your purr against my thigh,
content that you have fixed me.

Talkative Woman Behind the Counter in a College Town

The woman in the sandwich shop
with the light eyes and front teeth
that meet at the corners
leans across the counter conspiratorially
to warn me of the danger
of buying diet pills on Facebook –
she lost a bankcard with a nice ID that way.

Already tired of this freshwater town,
my eyes skip lines of Martin's
introduction to the critical study of religion
and when she comes over with my beef-on-weck,
she spies me checking my profile picture
and assures me that I look
so professional, like I could be a ballerina.
I look at her, ex-professional military,
and wish she had a daughter
to say such impractically sweet things to.

When I leave, she thanks me –sweetheart –
for clearing my table,
and extracts a promise that I will
come back and see her, now.
Maybe I say goodbye in the accent
of my hometown's waterfront restaurants
and barnacled fishing piers,
and maybe my step is lighter
until I hit the dirty concrete,
or maybe I don't and maybe it isn't,
but there is a moment
when my ocean doesn't seem
as far away.

And by their hands shall you know them

i.

Long fingers taper,
thin between each swollen joint,
rounds of bone that can't be lost,
like the purple-scarred stomach skin
from one year's crackers-and-coffee diet,
the bass guitar calluses on numbed fingertips,
the panic attacks and Xanax collected
after ODing on heroin,
going heartbeatless in a hospital bed
while his veins were pumped with activated charcoal.

ii.

Like sausage links, his square-tip digits
not much longer than my own,
but larger, like I thought his heart was.
The fingers making my sandwiches,
pressing lower back and shoulder blades
in a goodbye-for-now hug,
wrapping gauze over my wounded skin –
the same fingers that did not grasp at my own
when I walked out on our two years.

iii.

The permanently sun-tanned hands
that once carried me on morning walks down the beach
are thickening with age like tree trunks,
and perhaps inside are the rings
for every one of his seventy-four years,
thin rings for years of hardship, his divorces,
his losing battle with boats and business;
thick rings for the children he raised,
the steel guitar he played, the treehouse he built,
and maybe the times I wrapped my fingers around his thumb
and told him that I would never get married,
I would stay with him forever.

Circa '83 Lover

"It looks like a sex-tornado
came through here," he jokes
as we mingle legs and braid fingers,
surfacing from the depths
of each other's bodies
to take stock of the shucked clothes
hanging limp from dresser drawers,
the sheets bucked off the bed,
leaving it satin and half-naked beneath us.

Curled into the hollow of his arm and body,
I card slow fingers through the black hair of his chest,
head on the heart that has been beating
nine years longer than mine,
think of all the sunsets lost
in the gray folds of his brain,
the 3,287 days I was not alive to remember.
I kiss his stubbled jaw and beneath my tongue
I breathe the heat of him, his hunger
a musk of not-
-forever.